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Circular Migration and the Spaces of Cultural Assertion

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Harnessing primary and secondary evidence from India, our essay conceptualizes the cultural dynamics of migration. In so doing, it demonstrates the incompleteness of standard marginalist and Marxist accounts of labor circulation. As a corrective, we examine the linkages between culture, politics, space, and labor mobility and offer a way to think about them by building on poststructural critiques of development and postcolonial theories of migrant subjectivity. The proverbial compression of space-time not only has made extralocal work more viable for members of proletarianized groups but, more importantly, has allowed them to transfer their experiences of new ways of being into local contexts through acts of consumption and labor deployment that can become elements of a Gramscian counterhegemonic praxis. We argue that the possibility of this sort of "body politics" compels not merely a critique of the modernization paradigm that has organized classical migration studies but, more profoundly, a reassessment of the way we understand modernity itself. We advocate an approach that provincializes the Eurowest and foregrounds the existence of pluritopic "regional modernities." *Key Words: consumption, India, migration, regional modernities, work.*

This essay examines the relationship between circular migration, identity politics, and livelihood strategies against the backdrop of agrarian change in India. We consider the cultural dimensions of labor deployment and mobility in order both to evaluate and to supplement the practical reason embodied in the livelihood strategies of migrants.[1] Although neither migration nor its understanding as a material and symbolic activity is new, we suggest that what is new and important in terms of agrarian social relations is the intensity and rate at which labor, goods, and meanings are now able to circulate through space. In many parts of India, the forces of modernity have saturated the countryside to such an extent that semiotic and spatial dualisms that identify the "rural" as the realm of production and tradition and the "urban" as the realm of consumption and modernity now seem anachronistic.[2] At the same time, it is quite evident that the erasure of boundaries and the multiplication of spatial linkages have not followed a uniform pattern. As Watts (1992, 6) observes, "[G]lobality and locality are inextricably linked, but through complex mediations and configurations of 'traditional society'; the nonlocal processes driving capital mobility are always experienced, constituted, and mediated locally . . . [through] a working and reworking of modernity."

This underscores the point that villagers and villages have become cosmopolitan in myriad ways. In the process, they have become acquainted with worlds of goods and significations that carry all the baggage that accompany modern forms of desire.[3] But remarkably, these same forms of desire, and the consumptions of modernity they entail, can occasionally contain emancipatory potential for groups subordinated by place-specific relations of hierarchy. We are referring here to ideologies of class, caste, ethnicity, and gender that slot agents into normalized roles or identities and qualify their agency by making these roles appear as given—that is, as historically and spatially invariant. The primary purpose of this essay is to discuss migration and identity politics in terms of the renegotiation of group identities at the level of caste and tribal differences.[4]

The sprawling literature on "globalization" within geography and associated social-science disciplines makes it abundantly clear that global modernity has been an uneven and inequitous phenomenon, marked by simultaneous processes of time-space compression (Harvey 1989) and expansion (Tsing 2000b) at various scales, with the result that some cities, regions, and countries have become increasingly interlinked in terms of material and cultural flows, whereas others have become increasingly dissociated and marginalized (Piot 1999; Appadurai 2000; Bauman 2000; Beck 2000; Tsing 2000a). Our essay refers to three regions within India that fall into the first category, where time-space compression not only has made extralocal work more viable for members of subordinated groups but, more importantly, has allowed

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them to transfer their experiences of new ways of being into local contexts through acts that recast the body, either through forms of consumption or through the way their labor power is valorized in pursuit of livelihoods.[5] Such "body politics"—a term that we qualify below—mirror new attempts at self-making by marginalized caste and tribal groups—or, to invoke Bourdieu (1977, 168–69), a "heterodoxy" at the level of identity that has sporadically enabled disempowered migrant groups to repudiate established structures of authority and oppression.[6] More pointedly, we argue that with the rise of rural cosmopolitanism, modes of consumption and labor valorization have become elements of a Gramscian counterhegemonic praxis: a symbolic and material vocabulary for challenging ruling ideologies. However, we are the first to concede that the analytical recovery of such praxis is not easy, because the discursive universe from which it emerges is rarely well articulated or coherent. Intent is never clearly spelled out. Instead, as Gramsci (1971, 325–26) points out, subaltern praxis often reflects fragmentary conceptions and goals bundled together in bizarre combinations.[7]

We do not, therefore, base the possibility of counterhegemonic practice on the premise (*pace* Hebdige 1988, 206) that for Gramsci all social relations are contestable. Rather, we share the interpretation of Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 27, 30) that hegemony is intrinsically unstable because it is "the product of the dialectic whereby the content of dominant ideologies is distilled into shared forms that seem to have such historical longevity as to be above history—and, hence, to have the capacity to generate new substantive practices along the surfaces of economy and society."

But, having interpreted hegemony as a perforated rather than seamless structure of controlling ideas, whose legitimacy has to be constantly reproduced by the ruling classes, we want to make several qualifications to our thesis. First, at no point do we intend to suggest that the two types of body practices we highlight (styles of consumption and labor deployment) are equally effective everywhere as a language of antidomination. Second, we do not, in fact, even want to claim that forms of consumption and labor valorization are invariably premeditated acts of resistance. More often than not, these actions originate as relatively innocuous transgressions of social codes that then produce unexpected results. To put it another way, agency often surfaces like an uninvited guest from the byways of routine or everyday practice. We believe this is an important corrective to studies of popular culture (particularly subcultures of marginal groups) that are quick to anoint "consumerism as a form of resistance against traditional, elitist culture" (Campbell 1995, 98). Agency, in our view, is a more elusive and less purposive beast.[8] Third, our thesis does not claim to supplant standard narratives of migration within geography—for instance, the collection of articles in Robinson (1996), the textbook by Golledge and Stimson (1997), or the work of Skeldon (1997); rather, it supplements and complicates them by bringing a cultural gaze to geographies of work and migration.

The essay is organized as follows. We begin with an overview of conventional Marxist and marginalist explanations of migration, and question their pervasive economism and links to modernization theory. We then evaluate some recent literature on migration by geographers and anthropologists that critique these conventional accounts from feminist, postcolonial, and postdevelopment perspectives. These new approaches to migration stress the need to reassess migration as a "cultural event" (McHugh 2000), organized by practical consciousness, that transforms migrant subjectivities and notions of "place" in gendered, raced, and classed ways (Halfacree and Boyle 1993; White and Jackson 1995; Silvey and Lawson 1999; Lawson 2000). In short, they seek to transform population geography by bringing it into engagement with social theory. Although the new migration scholars succeed admirably in their efforts to free population geography from its behavioral and structural straitjackets—and, more importantly, from its links to Eurocentric ideologies of "modernization" and "development"—we argue that there is scope for an even more profound rethinking of modernity. Existing postcolonial and postdevelopment critiques of modernity are timely, acute, and correct in many respects, but too undifferentiated. There has been a strong tendency to identify modernity exclusively with its excesses, which then becomes the basis for its repudiation. Correspondingly, there has been a postmodern celebration of "difference," whose critical origins now threaten to be overshadowed by the (selective) installation of "difference" as the new guiding universal. This is particularly evident in postdevelopment manifestos (for instance, Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995; Rahnema 1997), where the postdevelopment imaginary has room for those "new social movements" that oppose "development" or express longing for a state of "predevelopment," but none for those that desire "development" in a variety of ways. This sort of exclusionary move not only has the ironic effect of consolidating the pernicious Eurocentric distinction between "modern" and "nonmodern," but also threatens to impose a new "regulative ideal" (Butler 1993) or normalizing vision that reveals the same modernist desire that is ostensibly posited as the object of critique.

As a way of formulating a more theoretically consistent and politically nuanced account of circular migration that

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furthers the work begun by the new migration scholars, we introduce two organizing concepts: an oppositional notion of self-making we term "body politics" that underscores the liberatory potential of migration within the context of development; and a provincialized notion of modernity we term "regional modernities" that avoids the conceptual contradictions of existing postcolonial and postdevelopment appraisals of migration. In its crudest form, our use of the term "regional modernities" can be read as a repudiation of Eurocentric scholarship that postulates (a singular) Modernity as self-validation of the Eurowest's intrinsic cultural superiority and the cause for its economic and political centrality within world affairs post–fifteenth century. (See Dussel 1999 for an incisive critique of the Eurocentric paradigm.) By contrast, we make the case for scholarship that carefully untangles how the ideals, practices, and institutional forms of Eurowestern modernity have traveled via colonialism and neocolonialism and articulated with regional polities and practices to produce distinctive "regional modernities," which operate at scales that are spatially and temporally transitive. One notable feature of "regional modernities" is their uneven rejection *and* acceptance of the universalizing theses of Eurowestern modernity. Hence, discursive and modular formations such as "nationalism" and "development" whose originary moments are claimed as European[9] may be appropriated and resignified as power/knowledge relations of a quite different sort within the context of "regional modernities." A discourse of Indian "nationalism" that combines the temporal domains of the spiritual/divine and the material/secular claims a very different ontology (*vide* Chatterjee 1993) than, say, a French "nationalism" founded on the premise of "empty, homogenous time" (*vide* Anderson [1983] 1991). Similarly, manifestos of "development" within a Costa Rican context, or "modernity" within the Zambian context, may become potent icons in struggles for "justice"—in one instance, by peasants who contrast the justice of "development" to the injustice of neoliberal macroeconomic policies that threaten their livelihoods (Edelman 1999); in the other instance, by Zambian masses who embraced "modernity" as vindication of a successful anti-imperial struggle (Ferguson 1999).

It is this "self-alienated" aspect of both "modernity" and "development" that we wish to foreground in this essay. In contrast to postdevelopment theorists who view "modernity" and "development" as uniformly disempowering, we want to propose that these are discursive formations whose operations are geographically and historically uneven, and which contain the elements of their own critique. In short, "modernity" and "development" can produce both vocabularies of self-repudiation (hence, the language of an unrealized "development" imaginary can become the basis for critiquing actually existing "development") and spaces for an oppositional politics of self-making by subaltern groups (hence, uneven "development" may undermine emplaced relations of domination and exclusion).

Our essay makes the additional move of linking this oppositional politics, which takes the form of "body politics," to circular migration. Harnessing primary and secondary evidence from three regions within India—rural Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal—we identify the ways in which members from subordinated caste and tribal groups have attempted to use the labor mobility promoted by "development" within the context of "regional modernities" to their advantage.

A Discontented Look at Standard Models of Migration

Shreshta (1988, 183) suggests that five types of modeling approaches have shaped migration studies since Ravenstein's influential 1885 article, "The Laws of Migration," formally inaugurated the field. They include: economic/behavioral models premised on utility maximization by migrants seeking better economic opportunities elsewhere; ecodemographic "push" models that identify population pressure and diminishing returns to labor as the primary causes of migration; spatial attraction or gravity models that emphasize urban "pull" factors, compensating for the rising transaction costs imposed on migration decisions by distance; anthroposociological models that highlight the importance of group networks and modernizing influences on migration; and neo-Marxist dependency models that view uneven development and the articulation of precapitalist with capitalist modes of production as the root cause of migration. In fact Shreshta's five-fold typology can be condensed, without grievous loss of precision, into two dominant approaches: on the one hand, "dual economy" models from the marginalist and rational choice tradition in economics (Ravenstein 1885, 1889; Lewis 1954, 1958; Jorgensen 1961, 1967; Ranis and Fei 1961; Harris and Todaro 1970; Todaro 1976; Stark 1991); and on the other, variants of the Marxist tradition that explain migration as a response to or consequence of uneven capitalist development and class struggle (Kautsky [1899]1990; Van Schendel and Faraizi 1984; Breman 1985; Standing 1985; Shreshta 1988; Pincus 1996; Wells 1996). Anthroposociological approaches that underline the importance of social networks are typically revisionary offshoots of these dominant frameworks (Stark 1991 is an example from the marginalist tradition and Breman 1996 from the

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Marxist that recognize the role of networks in migration decisions). An important third category of models that do not appear in Shreshtra's taxonomy is feminist interventions in the migration literature (exemplars include Abu-Lughod 1975; Chant 1992; Schenk-Sandbergen 1995; Mills 1999; Silvey and Lawson 1999).

Since reviews of the marginalist and Marxist perspectives are staples in the migration studies literature (see, for instance, Standing 1985; Shreshta 1988; Brown 1991), we offer only a cursory overview here. In the marginalist universe, individuals migrate from one sector to another if they expect better wages or marginal returns to labor in the other sector, net of migration costs.[10] The standard model has two sectors: agriculture (rural/traditional) and industry (urban/modern). The normal assumption is that the marginal value product of labor is lower in the agricultural sector relative to the industrial because of demographic pressure, poorer production technology, and relatively inelastic demand for agricultural products. As a result, agriculture on net expels laborers and industry on net receives them. In this essentially gravity-flow model, migration ceases and the system achieves equilibrium when marginal returns to labor are equalized in agriculture and industry.[11] Imperfect competition, imperfect information, and bounded rationality on the part of agents can be inserted into the basic model to explain variations in migration patterns and, in general, produce more sophisticated accounts of migration (see, for instance, Stark 1991), but the distilled wisdom of the approach remains fundamentally unchanged. Instrumental rationality, embodied in the migrant's exquisite sense of utility-maximization or risk-minimization, rules the day.

Marxist approaches harness a different system logic to explain migration: at the heart of these explanations lie efforts by dominant classes to sustain or expand levels of (absolute and relative) surplus extraction by exploiting spatially uneven patterns of proletarianization and depeasantization. Hence, the "divide and rule" thesis (Hart 1986; Pincus 1996) argues that locally dominant classes in "core" areas recruit seasonal migrants from "peripheral," economically underdeveloped sites as a way of creating a surplus labor pool that exerts downward pressure on local wages and, in addition, makes the local demand for labor more elastic, thereby weakening the likelihood of collective bargaining by resident workers. The Kautskian version argues that migration is a forced livelihood response undertaken by semiproletarian households who own or lease some amount of land in home areas, but not enough to generate a subsistence income. Migration becomes a way of covering the income shortfall. But precisely because extralocal (rural or urban) employers know that migrants have "continuing economic ties [with their village homes, and that these] . . . village homes bear part of the cost of maintaining and reproducing this labor force . . . [it allows] employers to pay [migrant workers] lower wages and offer lower benefits" (Mills 1997, 38). Migration, in this narrative, becomes the spatial analog of Kautskian "superexploitation," which subsidizes surplus extraction by capitalist employers. The third prominent Marxist account is migrant as the archetypical worker in a capitalist (and imperialist) world system, recruited to travel sometimes vast distances to sites of capitalist production (Breman 1989).

It is fairly clear that although both marginalist and Marxist approaches offer useful and credible insights on migration, they share an economistic bias that underplays or else entirely ignores the cultural universe of labor circulation. Moreover, both ultimately identify the uneven spatial development of the capitalist economy as the motive force of migration. But whereas the marginalists paint migration as a voluntary choice by instrumentally rational agents seeking better economic prospects, Marxists are less sanguine about the element of choice and are prone to view migration as the outcome of spatial variations in class interaction and capital's penetration of agriculture. To put it baldly, marginalist approaches posit migrant agency (although a curiously deterministic version of it, governed by the imperatives of utility optimization) relatively unhindered by structure, while Marxist approaches posit structure relatively impervious to migrant agency.

Neither the marginalists nor the Marxists question the Eurocentric, historicist metanarrative of "modernity" that undergirds their models of migration, and that has taken the form of Orientalism under colonialism, Modernization under imperialism and nationalism, and Globalization under late capitalism—in each instance ascribing "an underlying structural unity . . . to historical process and time that makes it possible to identify certain elements in the present as 'anachronistic' " (Chakrabarty 2000, 12). What is pernicious, of course, are the moral valences and prescriptions that accompany these stagist, secular accounts of time; they enable the production of binaries such as uncivilized/civilized, traditional/modern, backward/industrialized, and underdeveloped/ developed that justify, under the guise of Reason, often violent transformations of society and "nature" (Scott 1998 catalogs numerous misguided schemes hatched under colonial, capitalist, and socialist modernities). In this universalized story of Progress, migration and its upheavals are reduced to a necessary, if sometimes unfortunate, subplot in the unfolding of History in Europe's image.

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Culture, Space, and Labor Mobility

Recent studies of migration by geographers and anthropologists have sought to expose the ideological moorings of the social categories that organize developmentalist understandings of time and space within modernization theory, its colonial antecedents, and its post-Fordist cognates. Contrary to the behavioralism of marginalist theories of migration and the structuralism of Marxist theories, new migration scholars have sought to restore agency to migrants by showing, through biographical and ethnographic research, how migrants apprehend, negotiate, and transform the social structures that impinge on their lives (Halfacree and Boyle 1993; Lowe 1996; Stack 1996; Mills 1999; Lawson 2000; McHugh 2000). In short, although structuration theories, building on Saussurean semiotics and Marxist dialectics, have been around for at least two decades (exemplars include Bourdieu 1977 and Giddens 1984) and have offered sophisticated insights on the spatiotemporal recursivity of structure and agency, their empirical deployment within population geography and migration research is relatively recent.

Ben Rogaly's work on rural seasonal migration in eastern India is a stellar example of this trend. His (1998b, 22) basic argument, based on fieldwork in Bardhaman and Purulia districts in West Bengal, is that "seasonal migration . . . is not simply an inevitable part of the cycle of indebtedness, but can enable workers to save and even to accumulate capital on a very small scale"—thereby augmenting their abilities to alter institutionalized structures of oppression. This conclusion echoes some of the findings Wells (1996) documents in *Strawberry Fields*, her fine study of Mexican *braceros* and undocumented workers in the California strawberry industry. She describes how these workers toil in appalling conditions for their Mexican-American *padrones* in the North Monterey hills, often surviving on as little as U.S.$500 for an entire year and sustaining families or farming in Mexico by diligently dispatching their annual savings of $2,000–3,000 across the border (Wells, 209–10). Wells (164) describes the psychology of these migrants by noting that "undocumented workers . . . aspire to return to Mexico for their long-term economic advancement." Thus, migration is viewed as a means for accumulating surpluses that may enable workers to augment economic and social status in their places of origin.

Despite the ethnographic richness of these studies, the organizing paradigm for Wells and Rogaly is a dialectical materialism that views migration primarily as an "economic event" that fits into rural livelihood strategies, rather than as a simultaneously "cultural event" that transforms migrant subjectivities and perceptions of place. Our essay draws theoretical inspiration from three literatures: (a) new work in population geography that questions "longstanding essentialisms" (Silvey and Lawson 1999, 128) within the field, particularly the binaries that have shaped studies of migration empirically and normatively; (b) new anthropological work on migration and modernity that stresses the transformative power of consumption, whether of physical goods or of representations (Ong 1987, 1991; Miller 1995a, 1995b; Mills 1997, 1999); and (c) renewed interest in phenomenologies of the labor process (Joyce 1987; Scott 1990; Kapadia 1995; Freeman 2000).

The empirical justification for our article comes from the unprecedented multiplication of rural-urban *and* rural-rural linkages in South Asia over the past two decades, which has enormously expanded labor circulation and caused the catchment area of workers to become regional in scale, rather than locally rural or urban (Ghose 1990; McDowell and de Haan 1997). This has happened through occupational diversification for rural labor (Harriss 1991; Chandrasekhar 1993; Basant 1994), the spread of rural and periurban industrialization (Mukhopadhyay and Lim 1985; Islam 1987), the increased prevalence of contract farming (Little and Watts 1994; Panini 1999), and greater circulation of labor to agricultural and urban destinations due to declining labor intensity of farming in both irrigated and dryland areas (Breman 1985; Ramachandran 1990; Conway 1997; Rogaly 1998a). As Srivastava (1998, 584) points out in the Indian context, official statistics such as census data and National Sample Survey (NSS) data tend to "underestimate population mobility and labor migration to a significant extent," because they rely on survey instruments that primarily cover permanent and semipermanent migration and handle short-duration circular or seasonal migration far less effectively. By contrast, micro-level studies of migration (Dupont 1992; Breman 1996; Jayaraman and Lanjouw 1998; Breman and Das 2000) attest to large increases in labor mobility, particularly short-duration migration. In fact, a recent estimate suggests that one-sixth of India's population moves each year, many to work in agriculture, forestry, small industry, and construction (Rogaly 1998a, 273, n. 2).[12]

As more and more people enter into new work arrangements in rural areas or travel seasonally to work in informal sectors of the urban economy, their social relations, their sense of self, their relation to a sense of place, and their understandings of work undergo changes that are manifest in identity formation. To invoke Gramsci ([1957] 1980, 77), "[M]an [*sic*] changes himself, modifies himself, to the same extent that he changes and modifies

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the whole complex of relationships of which he is the nexus." Based on the accumulating empirical evidence, we contend that rural households in Asia are increasingly generating livelihoods by participating in plural, coeval, and spatially dispersed labor processes that display feudal, Fordist, and post-Fordist characteristics. The emerging space of work is regional—neither exclusively local or nonlocal, nor exclusively rural or urban—and the culture of work is one of liminality and fluidity: migrants are part of a traveling culture that exposes them to diverse worlds of association and signification that sow the seeds of discontent. Such are the modest origins of counterhegemony.

In their recent *Annals* article, Silvey and Lawson (1999) have charted new directions for migration studies, combining the insights of population geographers who draw on social theory to interrogate migration with insights from feminist, postcolonial, and postdevelopment theories that destabilize metanarratives of patriarchy and modernization and foreground the politics of difference. They do so by unraveling the developmentalist assumptions that have framed the categories "place" and "migrant" in classical migration studies. They note, for instance, that "place" has been commonly understood in the conventional migration literature in terms of some index of economic development or modernization. According to Silvey and Lawson (122), the focus on places as "arenas of development that structure action" rather than as "domains of contested power relations" has precluded attention to important sites of subject formation and negotiation such as communities, households, and bodies. It is precisely these places of difference, which have been silenced within the homogenizing discourse of modernization, that are brought to the forefront in feminist and postcolonial theorizing.

Inevitably, this rethinking of "place" within population geography demands a corresponding rethinking of the category "migrant," who, in classical migration studies, has been implicitly male and rural, and rarely inflected by the markings of "gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality" (Silvey and Lawson 1999, 125). We learn from Silvey and Lawson that to recognize the influence of these markings on the formation of migrant subjectivity is to simultaneously acknowledge the contingent nature of migrant identities and discover the ambivalence migrants voice about their mobility.

Our essay explores and augments the leads Silvey and Lawson offer, with two major differences. First, we appeal to recent anthropological studies of consumption and labor deployment in order to demonstrate how migrants from subaltern classes can rework processes of "modernization" and "development" to their advantage. Our primary intention is to show the "spaces of hope" (cf. Harvey 2000) that dialectically sprout in the interstices of domination. But in so doing, we also want to argue that many contemporary critics of "development" and "modernity" tend to universalize these processes, rather than give them the spatial and cultural particularity they deserve. We introduce the idea of "regional modernities" as a provisional corrective. Second, and correspondingly, we appeal to recent critiques of postcoloniality and postdevelopment in order to demonstrate that these perspectives, which begin with "a welcome humbling of certain hegemonic regimes of Truth" (Scott 1999, 4), often and unintentionally end up perpetuating elements of that same Truth.

Field Sites and Fieldwork

In giving empirical substance to our theoretical arguments on migration and modernity, we focus on two categories of subordinated groups in rural India: tribals and dalits.[13] We draw evidence from secondary materials, as well as fieldwork conducted by the authors between 1993 and 2001 in the Kheda and Baroda districts of Gujarat, Tiruvannamalai District of Tamil Nadu, and Midnapore District of West Bengal (Figure 1).

A brief note on the genesis of this article seems necessary. Our initial projects were independent evaluations of the distributive and political impacts of development programs in two different agrarian settings (Gidwani studied how the introduction of a large surface-irrigation scheme transformed agrarian social relations in central Gujarat, particularly the bargaining power and political consciousness of low caste workers; Sivaramakrishnan examined how the introduction of joint forest management (JFM) schemes in eastern West Bengal intersected with regional tribal politics, and whether JFM marked a devolution in state control or a new form of governmentality). Although the link between circular migration and changes in the cultural assertiveness of subordinated caste and tribal groups was not the explicit focus of our initial research programs, the parallels between these geographically dispersed research sites soon became evident to us. And while we were clearly struck by the upsurge in intercaste tensions and the rise of regional identity (caste, dalit, and tribal) politics in the 1990s, we were also intrigued by microstudies of migration (notably the work of Dutch anthropologist Jan Breman) that suggested a rising trend in labor mobility in rural India, particularly after 1991—the year when the Indian government formally adopted the macroeconomic tenets of "economic liberalization" and "structural adjustment." We decided it was important to explore whether there was a relationship between rising labor circulation and the intensification of regional identity politics.

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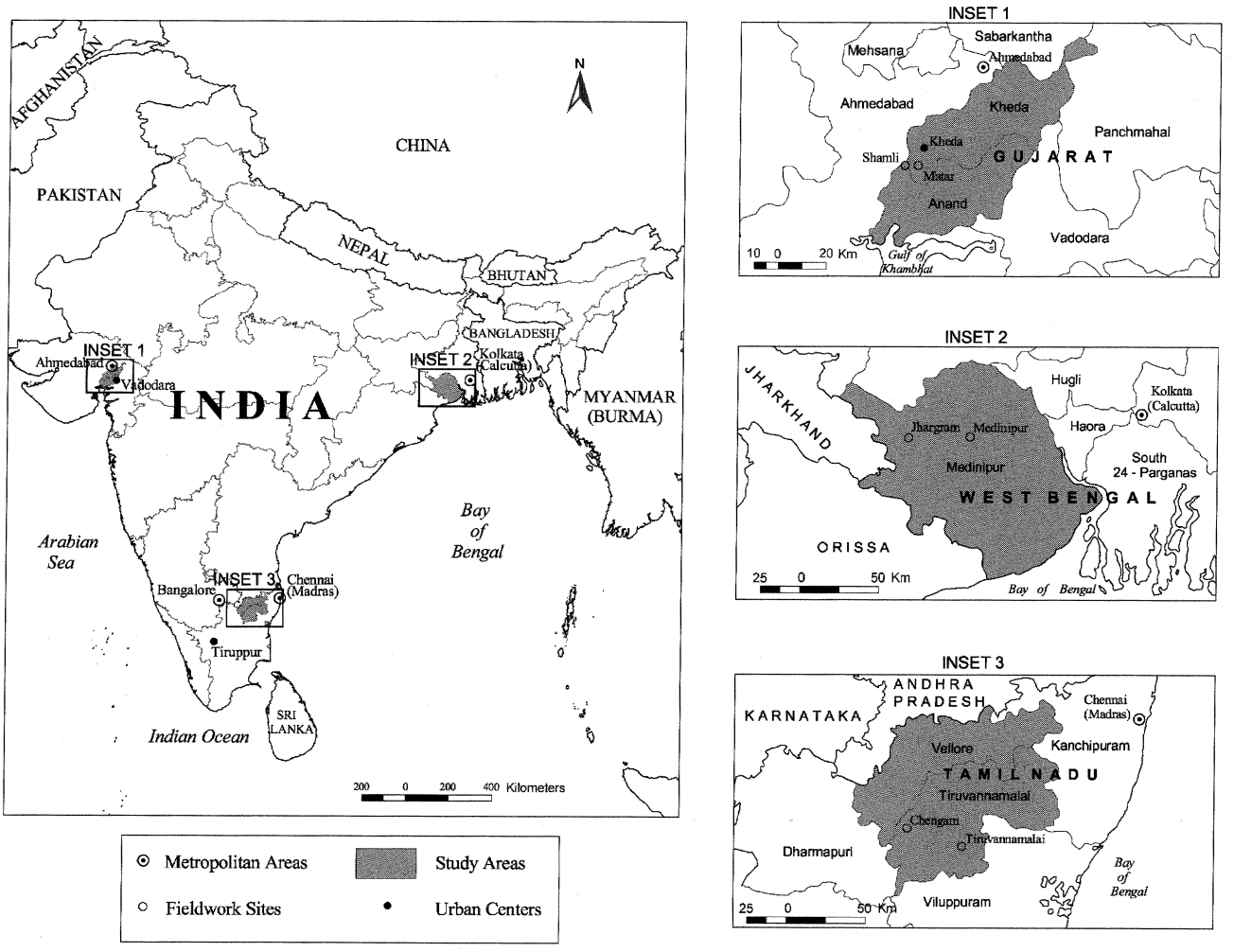

Figure 1. Fieldwork sites in India

Accordingly, in 1997, we initiated a collaborative research study to investigate the connections between short-duration (circular or seasonal) migration and regional political assertion by oppressed social groups. We decided to draw on Gujarat and West Bengal as our regional field sites—not merely for reasons of linguistic fluency and prior ethnographic work in these areas, but also because these states fulfilled the broad structural requirements that a study with our goals seemed to demand. Both Gujarat and West Bengal have long histories of colonial rule and modernization programs and, subsequently, nationalist interventions for "development"; both have a regional ecology that is a mix of dryland and irrigated areas; both have large tribal and dalit populations; both are highly industrialized and urbanized states; and both have aggressively wooed domestic and foreign capital investment in the aftermath of India's embrace of liberalization and structural adjustment. To these we added a third state, Tamil Nadu, which shares all the above structural characteristics.

To date, our project has tried to evaluate from a regional perspective and at the morphological level of group identity how processes of development and modernity have influenced patterns of labor circulation and identity politics in our study areas. The empirical findings presented in this essay derive from village-level survey and ethnographic data, key informant interviews, and associated studies of migration drawn from our three field areas. Our current research, still in its preliminary phases, investigates the cultural micropolitics of rural and urban work from the perspective of migrants and employers, and how migration processes and group politics are differentiated by gender and religion. We are sensitive to scholarship calling for engendered migration studies, and we recognize that the categories "tribe" and "dalit" deserve to be more fully differentiated along axes of domination such

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as gender, religion, and ethnicity. However, our initial research responded to a South Asian context in which several excellent recent studies on gender, migration, and contestations of patriarchy and class relations are available (Chen 1991; Feldman 1992; Pryer 1992; Kapadia 1995; Schenk-Sandbergen 1995; Fernandes 1997; Sen 1999). The literature on migration and dalit/tribal identities and politics is, by comparison, curiously thin. In this article, we offer a conceptual framework to fill this breach by examining how circular migration, consumption, labor deployment and identity politics interweave to produce alternative understandings of—and, occasionally, realignments within—place-based hierarchies of caste and tribe.

Migration and Body Politics

Like the new generation of migration scholars in geography and anthropology, we view migration as a social and cultural process—not merely an economic one—that transforms space and place.[14] Correspondingly, we regard migrants as part of a traveling culture, who, as such, are always straddling worlds, always negotiating shifting frames of reference, always facing new possibilities and constraints, and always grappling with new subject positions.

Our particular focus here are those dalit and tribal migrants who, through their travels and travails, often acquire political sensibilities that are strategically expressed in their places of origin as a "body politics." We derive the idea of a "body politics" from a feminist literature that has sought to rewrite bodies as signifying and signified entities that are "neither brute nor passive but . . . interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation" (Grosz 1994, 18).[15] This literature rejects the notion of bodies as natural objects, prior to culture, that can be differentiated on the basis of self-evident biological characteristics (such as "sex"). Indeed, as Judith Butler (1993, 2) argues in a radical vein, the materiality of bodies is produced performatively—that is, through a "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names." Accordingly, she considers it the task of social theory to understand how and why certain bodies come "to matter." She (1993, 9) advocates a "return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (emphasis in original).

Why is this kind of corporeal feminism relevant to the issue of dalit and tribal identities? We argue that it is deeply relevant for several reasons. First, as we now commonly appreciate, identities are individuated by externalizing an other—specifically, by "the positing of an 'other' which is constituted symbolically as opposed to the identity of the self" (Norval 1996, 65). More perniciously, identities come to be associated with a politics of purity, which actively seeks to exclude externalized others as impure or "abject." The term "abjection," Butler (1993, 243) explains, "designates a degraded or cast-out status within the terms of sociality." This could easily stand as the constitutive principle of India's caste system, which, despite its regional fluidity of hierarchies among endogamous groups who belong to the four overarching and formally-anointed (twice-born) "castes," fixes on the bodily impurity of dalits and tribals as a way of marking the latters' social and biological "inferiority" and thereby justifies their subordination by caste groups. In other words, just as the female body has been constructed as the abject of the male body and anointed as "inferior" within patriarchal ideologies, so, too, have dalit and tribal bodies been constructed within ideologies of caste.

Second—and linked to the previous point—is the imposition on women of "being *the* body for men while men are left free to soar to the heights of theoretical reflection and cultural production" (Grosz 1994, 22). This carries the implications within male-dominated society both that women have been viewed as less capable than men of intellectual and cultural activities and that their value to society has consisted primarily of the functions they have been able to perform for men. In similar fashion, caste society has actively tried to diminish the individuality and capacities of dalit and tribal women and men (who, as matter of rote, are treated as lower on the "civilizational" scale, verging on animality) and valued them primarily as the working body for caste groups.

It is therefore hardly surprising that dalits and tribals should choose to express their dissent via a politics of the body that entails two moves: first, the search for alternative forms of employment that enable them to reject their historical position of servitude to caste groups; and second, the desire for forms of consumption that would have previously only been affordable or possible for caste groups and which, therefore, signify social transgression.

Resistance to the Working Body

Labor deployment is conditioned by the structural features of uneven development and labor-market conditions; but we argue—in concurrence with the new scholars of migration—that it is also inflected by the desire of migrants to refashion place-based identities. We hypothesize that cyclical migration may occur because it can allow agents to loosen—and occasionally repudiate—institutionalized forms of authority and control that are exercised through the rural labor process. Clientist labor

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relations, debt bondage, and the drudgery of underpaid wage work are some of the most visible examples of such compulsion. Hence, rural workers who "escape" to daily or semipermanent factory jobs may encounter arduous working conditions in their new employment, even earn lower real wages and temporarily suffer diminished food security, but despite it express preference for economically inferior employment because it allows them to undercut the undesired roles thrust upon them by history. Parry's (1999) work in Madhya Pradesh, central India, illustrates this point very well: he describes how the Satnamis (a religious sect formed mainly of dalits) were galvanized after the mid-1960s by the prospect of employment opportunities at the Bhilai steel plant and the industrial city that developed around it.[16] Consider, as further evidence, the following example from central Gujarat, where Gidwani conducted his fieldwork.

The Kolis of Kheda District, Gujarat

The Baraiya and Tadbda Kolis occupy a liminal position in central Gujarat's caste hierarchy. Several of the upper castes consider them descendants of the original tribal inhabitants of the region, who were assimilated into caste society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through intermarriages with Rajput lineages from Rajasthan fleeing Mughal incursions there. Interestingly, today's Garasia and Darbar castes, who consider themselves the "true" descendents of the Rajput refugees, accept Koli women in marriage but refuse to give their own daughters in marriage to Koli men. This one-sided relationship seems driven entirely by cultural pragmatism (since the Garasias and Darbars are a numerically small community) and is a clear sign that they do not consider the Kolis their social equals. In fact, the Kolis are frequently disparaged by the upper castes as "rude," "backward," and "uncivilized." The Kolis maintain that members of the landed and locally dominant Patel caste dispossessed them of their once-substantial landholdings through usurious lending practices and subterfuge; but Patels dismiss these allegations as the claims of an "*agnani praja*" ("illiterate and ignorant people"), whose failure to prosper is entirely the result of their "*bagdela lakshan*" ("bad habits"—the reference is to the liking many Kolis display for recreational gambling, drinking, and opium consumption) and their *roodichust'ta* ("cultural conservatism"—figuratively denoting irrational adherence to custom, superstitiousness, and backwardness).

The reaction among Kolis to this sort of stereotyping is a mix of disdain and defiance. Many speak about the stigma of working as laborers for Patels, given that their forefathers (*bapdada*) were substantial landowners. A cultural revivalist core among the Baraiyas and Kolis exhorts their ritual status as *kshatriyas* or *rajputs* and reminds them that the Patels, although now operationally on par with the upper castes, were merely low-caste *sudras* several decades ago.[17] One Baraiya Koli *agevan* (community leader) characterized Patels as "*lanka dheds*." Since *dhed* is a derogatory form of address applied to Vankar dalits, the term "*lanka dheds*," which figuratively means "Vankars in guise," is meant not only to disparage the lowly ancestral origins of Patels but to further indicate that their present upper-caste status was managed through subterfuge—hence the use of the word "*lanka*," referring to Ravan's subterfuge in spiriting Sita away in the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*.[18]

Several Kolis have resorted to daily migratory work at a local light-bulb factory in the hope of evading agricultural work under Patel employers (ironically, this light-bulb factory—which is a collaborative between the Indian subsidiary of General Electric and Apar Lighting—is owned by a wealthy Desai Patel from the city of Nadiad!). The factory hires about 800 to 900 workers—all men—over three daily shifts. Most workers are temporary and are rehired periodically. The company does this in order to minimize the number of permanent employees on their roster, because permanent employees are eligible for various nonpecuniary benefits under Indian labor legislation. Daily income from an eight-hour shift is Rs. 40 (slightly under U.S.$1.00) for the average worker. Workers who attempt to organize a union (there were two cases between 1994 and 1995) are thrown out of their jobs. Since the company does not pay for the transportation of workers from their home villages, this is an added daily cost some workers must bear.

Meanwhile, agricultural wages for roughly six to seven hours of work are Rs. 25–30 ($0.55–$0.65) in peak season and Rs. 20–25 ($0.45 to $0.55) in the lean season. Workers expect—and normally receive—in-kind reimbursement for certain agricultural operations, such as the harvesting and threshing of wheat in the *rabi* (winter) season. Nonpecuniary benefits include the rights to collect fodder and fuel for household use from the farmer's field, to glean leftover grains after harvest, and, often, to solicit small zero-interest consumption or emergency loans from the employer.

Although expected returns from factory work and agricultural work are roughly *equal* when pecuniary and nonpecuniary benefits are tallied, the clamor to find factory work reaches fever pitch every morning, when aspiring workers line up in front of the GE-Apar complex. When asked to explain the attraction of uncertain factory work, several Kolis in the queue of workers claimed they

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were tired of being goaded by Patel farm employers; a few Kolis took the stance that factory work was more "prestigious" than farm work by invoking an inverted form of a Gujarati proverb that has become popular in central Gujarat:

Original proverb

Kheti uttam ("Cultivation best"),
Vyapar madhyam ("Trade middling"),
Naukri kanisht ("Salaried job worst").

Inverted form

Naukri uttam ("Salaried or nonfarm job best"),
Vyapar madhyam ("Trade middling"),
Kheti kanisht ("Cultivation worst").

The cultural dissent evident in the preceding example is reinforced by Breman's (1996, 238) observations about the motivations of younger generation dalit migrants in south Gujarat:

> The new generation of Halpatis seems to grasp every opportunity to escape the agrarian regime. Away from the village and from agriculture, they earn a few extra rupees, *mostly countered by greater effort besides the longer journey and work times* [emphasis added] . . . Hired for the day as loader-unloader, these young men and women stand in the back of the truck with their mates and enjoy a freedom that is denied them when working in the fields. For them, that is also the attraction of the urban casual labor markets. They are certainly treated there as commodities, but at least they are not immediately identified and stigmatized as *sala Dubra*. (author's emphasis for a derogatory local term applied by upper-caste employers to the low caste Halpatis)

One of the primary lessons we learn from these examples is that the link between migration and economic reason is less secure than is conventionally presupposed in migration studies. It is, for instance, neither clear that migration unambiguously improves livelihood security nor clear that lack of livelihood security is the *primary* determinant of migration. Relatively scant attention to the cultural molding of migrant agency is a large part of the problem. While it is clearly important to uncover and publicize the abject treatment of migrant workers by powerful employers,[19] it is equally necessary to document the "quite distinct motivations for migration" and admit the possibility that even in those cases where migration is involuntary workers may in fact see "their bargaining power improve in relation to local source area employers" (Rogaly 1999, 375). It is precisely this ingrained—and sometimes witting—neglect of migrant culture that has recently prompted anthropologists of work to caution against narratives of migration that identify declining economic security as the sole or overriding cause of the phenomenon. Such accounts, they claim, are liable to be incomplete, or even misplaced, because they exclude hermeneutic investigation into the varied perceptions and desires of migrants and altogether overlook how migration reflects and endows agency (Ong 1987; Safa 1990; Wolf 1992; Mills 1999).

The Lodhas of Midnapore District, West Bengal

The conflicted relationship that landless Lodha tribals in western Midnapore, West Bengal, bear to farm work is revealing in this regard. One immediately noteworthy feature of this relationship is its similarity to the attitudes of the Kolis of central Gujarat and the Halpatis of south Gujarat. Historically, the imperatives of rain-fed agriculture placed the landed, higher-caste Mahato farmers in relations of dominance over Lodha labor. An economic hierarchy based in control over cultivable land (the primary means of production) was reinforced by a cultural hierarchy that privileged Mahato agronomic knowledge and farm-management skills. Lodhas, meanwhile, were disparaged by the cultivating Mahato and Santhal groups for their poor cultivation skills. Lately, Lodha laborers have begun to counter these allegations of ignorance and sloth by pointing to declining standards of remuneration for farm work and the reminders it carries of historical processes of dispossession and denigration that have created their current status as Midnapore's landless proletariat. While the various income-earning options open to Lodhas differ little in strictly monetary terms,[20] the evaluation of these options by Lodha workers is colored by social memories of dependency on the Mahatos and the Lodhas' compulsion, as a result, to perform tasks that they consider humiliating. This is the single most important reason why the Lodhas try to avoid working in agriculture for the Mahatos whenever possible.

The case of the Lodhas illustrates the ambivalence of "development," both as a process of change and as a signifier of aspirations within the context of a distinctive "regional modernity." On the one hand, the story of the Lodhas—unrealized land reforms and dashed hopes of an agrarian transformation through canal irrigation[21]—can be written as a postdevelopment critique of "development." The emancipatory promises of "development" remain illusionary, but, through their discursive operations and appeal to "expert" knowledge, they depoliticize local struggles and secure the status quo. We find this postdevelopment perspective only partially convincing.

Lodha work opportunities have always fluctuated with the fate of the dry deciduous *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests of

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southern West Bengal: the collection of minor forest produce for the Forest Department and its contractors has long been an important source of supplementary income for the Lodhas. But their exclusion from a development program that fleetingly promised them the restored status of smallholders sabotaged deeply nurtured aspirations for farming and autonomy. This historical context, and the renewed social memories of exclusion that it contains for Lodhas, goes a long way in explaining the puzzling preference of Lodha men for *coolie* work in local bazaars over farm work, despite the physical hardship and instability in employment associated with coolie labor. However, not all Lodha men can make real the aspiration to abandon farm work for coolie work. Only those who can break the circle of debt and conscription can make the transition, and this is only possible when alternative, seasonally reliable, nonfarm work becomes available. Recently, with the active promotion of JFM initiatives in southwestern Bengal by the state, regional hierarchies of material and ideational domination have undergone a marked transformation.

Lodhas are acknowledged experts of the jungle. They have minute knowledge of forest flora and fauna. Their intimate knowledge of forest products has made them valued participants in JFM. State forestry officials and local leaders actively seek to employ them in JFM programs, often as *van mazdoor* (forest laborers) in Forest Department nurseries. As opportunities for alternative employment and intrarural migration expand, Lodha women and men find themselves increasingly able to disengage themselves from oppressive work relations with Mahatos. Their growing preference for cash wages over in-kind wages, which have been the historical route to debt bondage, is one visible example of their rising bargaining power. In this alternative narrative, which the Lodhas themselves valorize, "development" in the form of JFM becomes an avenue for "justice."

This "self-alienated" character of "development" is also evident in the life histories of female and male migrants from different tribal and caste groups in Purulia District of West Bengal that Rogaly and Coppard (2002) have recently begun to record. One such history, of a woman they call Soma Mahato, reveals how regionally uneven processes of development can enable circuits of migration that are liberatory.[22] According to Rogaly and Coppard (20),

> Soma's story can be read as one of emancipation as a woman in terms of her move away from difficult marriages towards effectively running household affairs in her natal village. When she first migrated she required her father's permission and was only allowed to go because she was accompanied by relatives. Migration has been central to her small-scale but steady accumulation of wealth for the household, some of which she expects to inherit. It has also enabled her to purchase goods on the journey home, including the blouse and petticoat, which are signs of upward mobility for many women. She has a very positive view of migration, clearly indicating, moreover, that it was and continues to be her choice.

A recent econometric study by Haberfeld and colleagues (1999) on the impact of seasonal migration on the social status and income levels of tribal households in Dungarpur District of Rajasthan, on the border with Gujarat, reinforces Rogaly's ethnographic findings from West Bengal. The authors note that migration is widespread, that migrant households have significantly higher income levels than nonmigrant households, and that income from migrant labor accounts "for almost 60% of their total annual income" (Haberfeld et al., 487). More pertinently, income from migration appears to allow migrant households to compensate for structural disadvantages in access to education and agricultural income vis-à-vis more privileged caste groups.

Each of the cases cited above reveals the efforts of subordinated tribal or dalit groups to reject their identification by caste groups as "inferior" persons whose bodies and labors can be used, abused, and controlled.

The Vankars of Central and North Gujarat

Consider also the case of Vankars, a widespread dalit community in Gujarat, traditionally weavers by occupation,[23] who came to be valued as paddy workers by employers from the Patel and Rajput castes. This was reputedly because they had nimble fingers that allowed them to transplant rice saplings and weed fields faster and more expertly than workers from other laboring groups. But another reason quickly surfaces in conversations with Patel and Rajput employers: namely, that unlike other dalit groups, Vankars "knew their place" in society ("*pota ni jigya jaanta hata*"). The implication is clear: Vankars were docile and rarely rancorous in their behavior with upper castes, unlike their fellow dalits—the Rohits, Vaghris, and Bhangis. As ably documented by Marxist scholars, compliance or obedience is an attribute that employers value in workers.

But today's Vankars are different. Gidwani (1996) interviewed twenty Vankar families in his census survey of 353 households in the central Gujarat village of Shamli. Whereas older-generation Vankars still display deference towards upper-caste groups, younger generation Vankars openly defy the prevalent caste hierarchy. Their attire and

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demeanor reflect their hostility to caste norms: they are invariably better dressed than their upper-caste counterparts; they refuse to tolerate the use of the term *dhed*, a derogative that upper castes frequently employ in conversations to describe Vankars; and they place a premium on education as a mark of their difference. It comes as no surprise to learn that the majority of younger-generation Vankars are schooled outside the village (highest educational attainment in years averages 9.11 in Vankar households, as contrasted to 6.50 in Rajput and 10.88 in Patel households). Half of the twenty Vankar households, moreover, have family members engaged in nonfarm employment: six work as clerks or chaperones in the subdistrict headquarter, two work in the diamond-polishing industry in the city of Surat in south Gujarat, one works as a civil engineer in the Public Works Department in a provincial north Gujarat city, and one is a career politician (whose rise to prominence in local politics is signaled by the enormous house he built in Shamli's Vankar quarter).[24]

None of the Vankars holding nonfarm jobs is a woman. The proximate reason for this imbalance appears to be the fact that even the more educated among the younger generation Vankar women are unable to pursue jobs once married due to patriarchal norms that prioritize household duties as the primary obligation of married women. Notwithstanding persistent gender inequities in employment and intrahousehold relations, however, migration has clearly transformed the political consciousness of young Vankars (although more visibly among Vankar men, who are able to operate in the "public" sphere, than Vankar women, whose participation in the public domain remains tightly circumscribed). Ketanbhai Shamabhai Parmar, son of a Vankar *agevan* (caste elder), told Gidwani of the various indignities his father had to suffer in Shamli as late as 1975—among them unpaid work (*veth*) for prominent Patel families and restrictions forbidding him from walking in the village without headgear or within ten feet of a member of the upper castes, lest these actions "pollute" village hierarchs. Pointing to a portrait of B. R. Ambedkar (the charismatic founder of organized twentieth-century dalit politics in India), Ketanbhai vowed that Vankars and other dalits would one day displace upper-caste rule in Gujarat. In his view, education leading to off-farm employment (preferably in a secure government job) was key to this aspiration. With this goal in mind, and at considerable personal expense, he has recently dispatched his eleven-year-old daughter to a reputable boarding school in the city of Ahmedabad. As Tarlo (1996, 141) points out, Vankars in Saurashtra (the western expanse of Gujarat) have followed a roughly similar trajectory:

> While they are still considered ritually impure, some have made good use of government support both in education and employment and now hold relatively prestigious white-collar jobs . . . in the city of Larabad. But if these jobs, combined with the money they have generated, have made these [Vankars] slightly more respected in the village, they have also made them more resented.

The Limits of Agency

As illustrated by the preceding case studies of the Kolis and Vankars of Gujarat and the Lodhas of West Bengal, the growing participation of dalits and tribals in circular migration circuits carries with it a potential for their economic and political empowerment, and may enable members of these subordinated groups to contest place-based hierarchies—indeed, to repudiate their "interpellation" (cf. Althusser 1971) as working bodies by the dominant castes. In some instances, the diverse lifeworlds of association and signification that migrants encounter in the course of their travels may lead to their participation in formal modes of political organizing, like unionization efforts in small-scale industries like brick-making, quarrying, dyeing, and construction. Work in urban areas may also bring dalit and tribal migrants into contact with political agenda that challenge the legitimacy of existing caste and class hierarchies and that suggest possibilities rival to their lived realities. This may happen either via radical nongovernmental organizations working in areas where migrants congregate or through contact with activists of dalit/lower caste political parties, such as the Dalit Panther movement or Rashtriya Party (RP) in western India, the Puthiya Tamizhagam in Tamil Nadu, or the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in northern India. Engagement with party activists may alert dalits and tribal migrants to the considerable political power they can wield within a democracy as a collective electoral bloc (Pushpendra 1999 furnishes empirical evidence for this claim).

Regardless of involvement with organized politics, the travails of migration invariably produce "street smarts"—and, with them, an oppositional consciousness—that can be mobilized to resist subordinating relations at home.[25] Breman (1996, 42) records the case of Babubhai, a dalit from one of his study villages who migrated to Bombay and returned after eighteen years:

> Bombay had been a hard training school where Babubhai expanded his social horizons and acquired a rebellious attitude towards work bosses, slumlords, authorities and other power holders. He now earns an independent living doing plastering and painting work. . . . He refuses, however, to work as agricultural laborer for less than minimum wage. Never again,

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he has assured me more than once, will he accept such treatment.

While these varied instances of political opposition are important reminders of the spaces of cultural assertion that can take shape when migrant subjects undermine the sedentarist metaphysics of modern forms of domination, it is equally important not to be naively celebrationist. The limits on counterhegemonic practices by subordinated groups are real and formidable. For instance, as Breman and Das (2000) observe, unionization attempts by migrants are sporadic and rarely successful. Moreover, fearing the political assertiveness of dalits and tribals, caste groups have adopted a variety of tactics to mitigate against a loss of control over their pools of labor power. These tactics attempt to render dalit and tribal laborers "immobile" and to prevent the growth of political opposition and bargaining power that circular migration may produce. The following example from one of Gidwani's study villages in central Gujarat illustrates the efforts of caste groups to regulate dalits as "bodies for labor."

The Harijans of Village Astha, Kheda District, Gujarat[26]

The Harijans (Bhangis) of Astha own eleven acres of land, five owned by Bholabhai Chhaganbhai Harijan. Four of these five acres are unirrigated *goradu* that is able to produce only one crop annually; one acre is irrigated *kyari* land, which can be double-cropped. Bholabhai is fortunate. The other Bhangis have smaller plots and survive largely on wage labor. The Bhangis have traditionally had a strongly clientalist relationship with upper castes. Several have worked, at one time or another, as *mahinadars* (farm servants; literally, "monthly contractors") for Brahmins and Patels in Astha. Because cultivators have begun to perceive permanent labor contracts as more expensive than casual labor contracts, and because the younger generation of Harijans resents the element of unfreedom that permanent contracts contain, the prevalence of *mahinadari* has declined. A few decades ago almost every upper-caste cultivators had one or more mahinadars, servility being an emblem of status; today, only two Harijans work as mahinadars.

The recent introduction of canal irrigation into the area and the use of tractors, mechanical threshers, and combine-harvesters has transformed production, raising cropping intensity. According to the Harijans, agricultural mechanization has led to only a slight reduction in labor demands compared to the pre-irrigation scenario. Soil and climatic conditions make it difficult to switch away from rice; moreover, rice production is not readily amenable to mechanization. Transplanting, weeding, fertilizing, and watering are labor-intensive operations. The harvesting and threshing of the rice crop are the only two operations where labor can be replaced with relative ease. While the use of mechanical threshers is catching on, adoption is slow, because cultivators feel mechanical threshing results in greater damage to the grain. Meanwhile, the use of combine harvesters is constrained by plot size and soil texture. Harvesters cannot maneuver well in small plots with awkward corners, and they tend to flounder in the sticky, water-retentive, loamy clay soil around Astha. Given that cultivators are married to paddy cultivation for the foreseeable future, they depend on labor and pursue strategies to "discipline" them, including the active recruitment of migrant workers from adjoining Panchmahal District. Cultivators also attempt to control the Harijans' access to the means of production, including surplus village grazing lands (*gauchar*) and governmental small-enterprise loans. The Bhangis believe that the gauchar is cultivable. Has the salt-affected gauchar in the adjoining village of Limbdevi not been given to members from backward communities, they ask, and has it not become cultivable? The Bhangis say that they have repeatedly appealed to the district collector (DC) to award them gauchar lands. The DC evidently bears no objections, provided that the village council (*gram panchayat*) is agreeable. Yet, the gram panchayat head (*sarpanch*)—a Patel—refuses the request, declaring that the land is for grazing village cattle. Apparently, the optimistic appraisal of the Bhangis regarding the gauchar is at variance with the opinions of caste groups in the village, particularly the Patel elite, who categorically assert that the gauchar is unfit for cultivation.

The Harijans feel that this denial of gauchar lands is an attempt by land-owning caste groups to keep them landless and idle, so that larger farmers can continue to have ready access to a "reserve army" of underemployed workers. If dalits were to become landed, labor scarcity would increase and agricultural wages would rise. But, more damagingly for the village elite, dalits might be able to accumulate savings to realize their aspirations for nonfarm work. Bholabhai Chhaganbhai Harijan claims that this is the primary reason why the Patel sarpanch does not heed his loan petitions: Bholabhai Chhaganbhai wants to set up a small retail shop in the village but cannot apply for a government loan without the sarpanch's signature on the loan application form. He narrated an instance when the sarpanch rejected his request for a signature with the remark: "*Shoon Bhola, kyaan paisa malshe? Aa dhandha ni vaat chhod, majuri ma dhyaan raakh*" ("What, Bhola, who will give you a loan? Drop this idea of a business and concentrate on work").

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Resistance through the Consuming Body

Given the difficulties subordinated groups face in overtly resisting exploitative social relations, the norm is a more subdued, often obtuse repudiation of place-specific social hierarchies through "aesthetic transgressions" that recast bodies and therefore the body politic.[27] As Bourdieu (1984, 56–57) writes, "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as possessors of legitimate culture [i.e., dominant groups] is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated . . . [because] [t]astes are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference." Aesthetic transgressions challenge this inevitability and the doxa that sustains extant power relations. These trangressions take many forms, including nonconformist attire, speaking styles, mannerisms, diets, and consumption habits. In short, they bespeak a "cultural style,"[28] a term we borrow from anthropologist James Ferguson (1999, 83), who found that migrant workers in the urban Copper Belt of Zambia, in "considering how one might succeed or fail in the task of 'going home' to a rural area . . . turned quickly from questions of remittances to matters of dress, styles of speech, attitudes, habits, even body carriage."[29]

Consumption and Politics

During field work in Tiruvannamalai District, Tamil Nadu, in June 1997, Sivaramakrishnan observed that dominant peasant and business castes who reside in the plains area nurture deep antagonism towards Malayali tribals from the Javadi Hills. Over the past decade, these tribals have begun to participate in seasonal labor circuits that crisscross Tamil Nadu and adjoining Karnataka. Their travels have generated money and growing disdain towards the plains elite. Resentful over this loss of social control and superior standing vis-à-vis the Malayalis, one farmer in the village of Chengam told Sivaramakrishnan with considerable indignation that "[T]he Malayali returns from urban work with lots of cash and then buys fancy face creams in the local store while we [the local farmers] continue to use cheap soaps!"

Writing on rural Bangladeshi women's growing participation in the urban workforce—particularly in public-sector employment and export-processing firms in Dhaka—Shelley Feldman (1992) captures the ambivalence of, and transformations in, body practices associated with the migration process. According to her (123–24), migration "[o]n the one hand . . . provide[s] women with an opportunity for employment previously denied them. On the other hand . . . [it] tie[s] women to forms of obligation and social control that establish new forms of subordination and domination." Young unmarried women are attracted to urban employment because it allows them to exert "independence from male family members' control," to engage in "unaccompanied inter- and intracity travel" and "new consumption patterns," and to "leave the *sari* and *burkha* behind and don *shalwar* (long shirt) and *comise* (loose trousers) to reflect their age and mobility" (Feldman, 122).

Why do parents permit young women to travel to Dhaka? One explanation most certainly seems to be "the slow erosion of economic security" (Feldman 1992, 121) at home. But an equally valid one that Feldman does not foreground is the likelihood that repatriated incomes from working daughters generate consumption opportunities for parents that enhance the family's social status. In short, whereas earlier "a working daughter often signified the lack of concern with purdah and appropriate female behavior and was interpreted by other villagers as representing the lack of family status and resources" (Feldman, 117), the charged significations carried by "modern" consumer goods may have the capacity to counteract social norms predicated upon religious and patriarchal ideologies. As several theorists have pointed out (Bourdieu 1984 and Miller 1995b are representative), consumption can offer new sources of social distinction and status, and even supply the semiotic elements for a counterhegemonic vocabulary.

Mary Beth Mills' (1997, 1999) study of Thai rural women shows they are attracted to urban employment because of both ongoing obligations to assist cash-strapped rural households *and* opportunities to pursue personal autonomy and self-expression through engagement with urban "modernity" and "progress." She argues that despite diverse backgrounds, these women found common ground in the labor movement (in which they became involved after working and establishing temporary residence in Bangkok). They were able to explore new ways of thinking about themselves and their gendered experiences. Through limited means and opportunities for oppositional expression, unionized migrants began to contest inequitable labor relations and gender roles, and learned how to press their demands through a discourse of "rights" as workers and as women.

Attire and Politics

Garment is a central element in dalit body politics because of the severe proscriptions that have been imposed on their dress by the upper castes (see Tarlo 1996). Under the old *jajman* (patron) system, it was customary for dalits to receive clothing from their jajman at festival time. Dalits were almost universally prohibited from wearing headgear of any sort in the presence of an

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upper caste; in parts of Tamil Nadu, they were prohibited from carrying an umbrella or wearing a shirt, shoes, or sunglasses. More degradingly, until the 1930s, dalit women in Ramnad District of Tamil Nadu were not allowed to cover their breasts or wear a sari that reached below the ankle, and dalit men were compelled to wear loincloths that could not reach below the knees (Deliége 1999, 107). Historian Chris Bayly (1986, 286), in a provocative essay on the politics of attire within Indian society, observes that one of the most important "uses of cloth in the social process . . . [is] its use in symbolizing status or in recording changes of status." While this function is common to all societies, there is a special significance granted to cloth in many regions of India:

> [C]loth as a transactional medium was conceived as a unique conveyor of spirit and substance, holy, strengthening, or polluting. Thus, cloth of different textures, colors, or origins could do more than simply impart information in society; it could change the moral and physical substance of the individual. . . . Cloth, then, was almost literally as integral to the person as his skin (Bayly 1986, 287, 291).

On a field visit in June 1999 to the village of Vanampuram, a multicaste periurban village just a few miles out of the town of Tiruvannamalai, we received a first-hand introduction to the politics of attire. In conversation with a local landowner and politician, a member of the socially dominant but numerically small Agemudi caste, we inquired about labor availability in the village for agricultural operations. Our informant complained bitterly about labor scarcity. He told us that younger-generation dalits in the village, who constitute the bulk of the rural workforce, prefer to work in construction and urban industries in Hosur, Tiruppur, and other industrial centers in south India. Then, with obvious ire, he mocked the dalits on their newly acquired dress habits: "They parade around in jeans and costly sports shoes." Although the dalits are still overtly deferential towards the local elite, their preference for migratory work and consumption of Western attire indicates to landed groups like the Kurumbar and Agemudis that the traditional social order is under siege. Field observations made by French anthropologist Robert Deliége in another part of rural Tamil Nadu on the social conditions of the dalit Paraiyars supports this conclusion. He (1999, 111) writes that when it comes to clothing, dalits are required to dress with a certain humility, and that young dalits "like to tell how furious it makes high-caste people to see them dressed in fashion; and this stylishness can spark reactions ranging from sarcasm to blows."

Consider also the politics of cultural style in Valiyambadu, a multicaste study village, where dalit families constitute over 40 percent of the village residents (687 families). At the time when migration details were collected, in the fall of 2000, 15 percent of all families in the village (110 families) were engaged in some type of migration. Circular migration was the dominant form, involving 72 families. Of these, nearly two-thirds were from dalit households, and destinations included the cities of Tiruppur, Chennai, and Bangalore. Migrants engaged in unskilled labor and semiskilled employment, a common vocation being masonry work at construction sites in Bangalore. About a dozen dalit migrants had mustered resources to set up petty businesses in Chennai and Tiruppur (for example, one barber from Valiyambadu now plies his trade in Tiruppur, while another dalit has a tailoring shop in Chennai). In 60 percent of the circular migration cases, young, single sons left for Kerala, Coorg, Bangalore, and Chennai to work in construction, as coolies in public-works projects, as seasonal labor in plantations, and as attendants or guards (*chowkidars*) at private firms and homes. They contributed remittances to their rural, impoverished families in Valiyambadu, along with urban styles and city fashions to their peers, younger siblings, and other children in the village.

In other cases, nucleated dalit families traveled to Bangalore, where the men found work as masons, carpenters, and bricklayers and the women worked as unskilled labor in the same construction sites or, occasionally, ventured into neighboring residential areas to work as domestic servants. These young men and women returned to Valiyambadu as bearers of "cosmopolitan" lifestyles, in the clothes they wore, the sights and images they described, and the urban work opportunities they relayed to kin and neighbors. Their comportment and display irritated landed families from the Agemudiyar, Vellala, Naidu, and Kurumba castes, who, habituated to subservience from older dalits, witnessed these changes among younger-generation dalits with consternation.[30]

Consumption as Counterhegemony

The dalits of Vanambaram and Valiyambadu may or may not consider their consumption and labor deployment choices acts of "resistance." But if we judge resistance through political *effect* rather than *intent*, it is abundantly clear that dalit body practices are experienced negatively by the dominant group as a repudiation of their social codes and hierarchies—in other words, as elements of a "counterhegemony." Bourdieu (1984, 57) reminds us that an important function of the working classes, in any

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society, is to "serve as foil, a negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves, by successive negations"—in short, as the "abject other" or constitutive outside of "civilized" society. But what if the working classes should violate the aesthetic hierarchy and begin to exhibit dispositions that were hitherto the purview of the elite, making elite identity insecure?[31] Indeed, caste elites in Tamil Nadu (and elsewhere) have responded by reinforcing social hierarchies in a variety of ways. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, members of the dominant castes are exhibiting renewed interest in local history and sponsoring the discovery of hero-stones buried in the landscape that consolidate their claims to have settled and "civilized" the villages in which they live. The ancestral exploits of caste groups are celebrated in vernacular newsletters and caste forums, and new struggles over village temples and access to them are emerging in villages around our study area in Tiruvannamalai District.

Our argument, quite simply, is that much of social life is about marking "distance" and naturalizing "difference." And distance and difference are typically plotted through the invention of aesthetic hierarchies and dispositions, which include forms of consumption and the manner in which labor is deployed. We do not argue, however, that such expressions of "body politics" are symptomatic of late capitalist modernity. The historical record of migration is instructive. Early nineteenth-century migrants from northern Tamil Nadu were poor, lower-caste, and from dryland areas like Tiruvannamalai that were well connected to Madras and Pondicherry (Barnabas 1991). The flow of migrants thickened as Tenassarim was conquered, and plantations were established in Sri Lanka, Mauritius and the West Indies. The abolition of slavery in 1834 provided a great impetus to these flows, made up preponderantly of men (Geoghehan 1873, 4–22). By the early twentieth century, migrants from northern Tamil Nadu's drylands and hill areas were also supplying factory demands in western India, Burma, and the Ganges delta. These factory workers, like our contemporary informants, "cherished the hope of returning" home with assets and social standing (*Report of the Royal Commission on Labor in India* 1931, 13).[32] And, like the Tamilian plantation workers who traveled to the Caribbean and Straits Settlements in the previous century, factory migrants went to extraordinary lengths to accumulate and repatriate wealth to their homes.[33] The memories and social consequences of such travel and return worked to consolidate a regionally modern history of mobility.

Over the past twenty years, it is the growing *intensity* of circular migration by dalit and tribal groups in dryland India that is of striking interest. Their travels present aspects of continuity and rupture from the colonial period. For instance, the hill-tribe Malayalis of the Javadis are relative newcomers to such travel, which takes them across district and state boundaries. A group of six informants told us in the summer of 1999 that neither they nor their parents had traveled to construction sites in Bangalore, or plantations in the Coorg, before the 1980s; their migrations are still organized around the sowing and harvesting of dry rice (*samai*) in the monsoon season (July–December). A primary motivation for migration is the prospect of lump-sum earnings that are used for the liquidation of high-interest debts owed to moneylenders in the Javadi Hills. Bride price, house-building, and the consumption of cigarettes, soaps, radios, watches, clothes, and shoes are additional priorities. In sharp contrast to the tribal Malayalis, dalit youth migrants from adjoining plains villages were more likely to use the migration experience to enhance their qualifications for semiskilled work and elude the drudgery of farm work for caste landowners. Some stressed prospects for economic mobility by highlighting opportunities to work for, and learn, tile manufacture as it mushroomed around a booming construction industry in expanding towns. Others underscored the excitement of travel and the new-found solidarity they experienced with dalit co-workers as they journeyed through south India erecting and disbanding temporary structures (*pandals*) used for political meetings, government functions, festivals, and fairs.[34]

Provincializing Migration, Modernity, and Development

Silvey and Lawson (1999, 122) are justifiably critical of economistic approaches to migration that have evaluated it as part of a prefigured "Western modernization trajectory, and so have authorized theoretical exclusions of *development itself* as contested and problematic" (emphasis in original). We interpret their claims as a corrective to conventional migration scholarship based on two relatively recent strands of theorizing. First, their article invokes postcolonial scholarship because such scholarship contains a cognitive-political demand for the decolonization of representation—specifically, the decolonization of the West's theory of the non-West. Second, they appeal to postdevelopment scholarship, which assails "development" as a Eurocentric discourse that imposes its normalizing and teleological vision on the world through an ensemble of social institutions, semiotic categories, and practices that regulate the realms of thought, subjectivity, and action (Sachs 1992; Ferguson 1994; Crush 1995).

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We have no disaffection with either postcolonial or postdevelopment scholarship at these general levels of characterization; indeed, we are sympathetic to their efforts to create a counterspace for representational and political practice. Our disquiet stems from the fact that in their attempts to destabilize the master narratives of modernity, both postcolonial and postdevelopment scholarship have tended to portray "modernity" and "development" as monolithic, depoliticizing processes, everywhere the same and always tainted beyond redemption by their progressivist European provenance. Setting up the target of criticism in this manner has led many postcolonial scholars to privilege what David Scott (1999, 135) perceptively summarizes as the "responsibility to otherness" over the "responsibility to act"—in other words, "the opening up of cognitive space for the play of difference over the affirmation of institutional frameworks that embody normative political values and normative political objectives." Postdevelopment scholars have similarly tended towards a celebration of "difference." The logical endpoint of their critique has been the celebration of "antidevelopment," an inversionary discourse that is "retrieved" by foregrounding forms of cultural difference that "development" has tended to homogenize or suppress, and by recovering the hitherto silenced communitarian, antimarket, antidevelopment voices of "development's" countless victims (Sachs 1992; Esteva and Prakash 1996; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997).

It is in this spirit of recovery that we can read Silvey and Lawson's (1999, 123) call to researchers to interpret the "voices of migrants themselves as theoretically meaningful" as a way of problematizing "development" and critiquing "categorizations of place as undeveloped, backward, and traditional." While we are sympathetic to this spirit, however, we feel it is necessary for migration researchers to be aware of the large debate that has circulated within postcolonial studies on the epistemological possibility and methodological challenges of recovering "subaltern" voices (see endnotes 35 and 36). This is particularly problematic when the underlying conceptualization of power is the Foucauldian one of "biopower" or "disciplinary power"—as, in fact, it is for most postcolonial and postdevelopment scholarship. If biopower is indeed the practical manifestation of the modern power/knowledge regime of social control, then it is difficult to see how an antidisciplinarian agency can be meaningfully recovered.[35] After all, biopower owes its name to the fact that "it penetrates deeply into the reified body and confiscates the whole organism along the subtle paths of scientific objectification and subjectivity generated by technologies of truth" (Habermas 1996, 285). Where such a notion of power inspires the Foucauldian postdevelopment/postcolonial critique of modernity, it leaves little room for the sort of oppositional consciousness or transformative acts of resistance (rather than simply acts of resistance that are enabled by power and reproduce it) that we take as marks of counterhegemonic agency.[36]

We merely point this out as a methodological conundrum within the development-as-discourse argument. In our view, it is more analytically consistent to regard development as a system of hegemonic ideas, following Gramsci, that is perforated rather than saturating, whose legitimacy must be constantly reproduced, and, which, as such, is potentially open to contestation.[37] As William Roseberry (1996, 77) points out, "Gramsci understood and emphasized, more clearly than did his interpreters, the complex unity of coercion and consent in situations of domination. Hegemony was a more *material* and *political* concept in Gramsci's usages that it has since become . . . [Indeed,] Gramsci well understood the *fragility* of hegemony" (emphasis in original).

Our more deep-seated concern with the Foucauldian critique is that while it exposes development as part and parcel of a Eurocentric discourse of modernity, it unskeptically accepts the idea that modernity emerged autonomously in Europe and later spread, via colonialism, to the rest of the world. This formulation never entertains the possibility that the rationalizing processes within economy and society that we typically associate with modernity (capitalist production, division of labor, contractual exchange, bureaucratic administration, the mapping of people and places, the disjuncture between state and civil society, and the ascendance of "science") might have sprouted at different times, on different levels, over different scales, and in different cultural incarnations in various regions of the world, quite autonomously of European influence. Scholars of different theoretical persuasion have recognized, for instance, the distinctive historical processes contributing to the construction of Indian modernities. Partha Chatterjee (1997, 198) has recently illustrated this point in his discussion of nation-states and modernity, in which he says, "[T]here cannot be just one modernity irrespective of geography, time, environment and social conditions. The forms of modernity will have to vary among different countries depending upon specific circumstances and social practices."

Such omissions in the conventional Foucauldian take on "modernity" render the recent literature on "alternative modernities" particularly salient. As we view it, the intellectual and political motivation of this literature has been to vernacularize Eurowestern modernity (henceforth, Modernity) by unsettling its pretensions to universality, by arguing that Modernity "imposes a false

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uniformity on the diverse and multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the allegedly culture-neutral forms and processes . . . characteristic of societal modernization" (Gaonkar 1999, 15).

Despite this shared political impulse, the practical task of provincializing Modernity has been undertaken by scholars in quite different ways. The first is a "cultural" angle which maintains that Modernity, far from replicating itself in its own image (the convergence theory of societal modernization that lurks in classical migration studies and that the new migration scholars soundly critique), unfolds "within a specific cultural or civilizational context and that different starting points for the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes" (Gaonkar 1999, 15). Scholars who subscribe to this viewpoint (exemplars include Lee 1993; Appadurai 1996; Gaonkar 1999) tend to stress the cosmopolitanism that arises from the global flow of ideas, images, and commodities and the multiple—often subversive—ways in which modernity is "consumed."

The second angle from which Modernity has been critiqued is the "political"; and here the objective has been to provincialize Reason and illustrate the ambivalent encounter of Europe with colonized societies. While acknowledging the influence of Western political ideas such as "secularism," "democracy," "equality," and "justice" on the political imaginaries nurtured in anticolonial struggles, scholars such as Chatterjee (1993), Prakash (1999), and Chakrabarty (2000) have been at pains to show how the historicist assumptions embodied in these Western ideas were upstaged and reinterpreted by colonial subjects.[38] Adherents of the "political" critique have sought not so much to reject the liberatory impulse contained in the universalizing ideals of Modernity as much as to show how the diffusion of these ideals in colonized societies was socially and spatially uneven, and, more importantly, that the promise of freedom held out by Modernity was always tainted by the violence of its imposition.

A third angle from which the metanarrative of Modernity has been challenged is best described as the "articulationist" angle. Here, the effort has been to demonstrate historical continuities between non-Western and Western forms of economic and political organization. Thus, within the Indian context we have begun to learn from revisionist historiographies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries about the precolonial emergence of capitalist relations in the economy and patterns of modern state formation that were later adapted, rather than supplanted, under colonialism (for key syntheses, see Bayly 1990; Subrahmanyam 1992; Bose and Jalal 1997, 48–56).

We incorporate each of these three perspectives in our concept of "regional modernities," which we consider a theoretically consistent, empirically nuanced, and politically radical way of advancing the critique of classical migration studies and Modernity initiated by the new migration scholars. Thus, the idea of "regional modernities" has a triadic structure. First, we emphasize the flow of ideas, images, and goods and how these facilitate a counterhegemonic politics of consumption among subordinated groups. Second, we underscore the ambivalent and self-alienated character of "modernity" and "development." This formulation, on the one hand, means acknowledging the (material and symbolic) violence of these hegemonic formations in agreement with postcolonial and postdevelopment critics. On the other hand, it leaves open the possibility for the appropriation of the practices and languages of "modernity" and "development" by subordinate groups in emancipatory ways. This is precisely why we argue *against* a discursive determinism that seems to preclude a space for the political and argue instead *for* situating "modernity" and "development" as hegemonizing processes that are brittle and open to contestation.[39] We also insert here the notion of the *material* into the concept of hegemony by suggesting that counterhegemonic struggles by subordinate groups are conducted through the language of "body politics" that consists of two lexical elements: first, the recasting of the working body, and, second, the recasting of the consuming body. The third component of our concept of "regional modernities" emphasizes a movement away from stagist or transition narratives of modernity that tend to reinforce a Eurocentric view of the world and towards articulationist narratives that underscore discontinuities and continuities between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial social formations. What is different about migration in the late twentieth century is not migration itself, but how *habitually* it is undertaken and what it can *symbolically* accomplish for the migrant through the avenues of consumption and labor deployment.[40]

Conclusion

Our essay has asked two broad questions: First, how do circular migrants create spaces for cultural and political assertion within the context of "regional modernities"? And second, what role do cultural politics play in the subjective experience and assessment of circular migration? These questions relate in important ways to the historical centrality of migration in the struggle for livelihood security—a chronic problem in dryland India, even for villagers with means and status. People from all

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groups—high and low castes, landlords and laborers, artisans and service workers—have migrant histories in their families. However, patterns of migration and the specific dynamics of mobility and subject formation within the context of place-based hierarchies and inequalities have varied by groups and over time and space.

Our essay quite deliberately focuses on the migratory experiences of dalits and tribals in the late twentieth century and tries to ask whether mobility *at this juncture in time* has enabled these historically marginalized groups to oppose the hegemony of dominant caste groups in their home villages and regions. In underscoring a historic "moment," we intend to draw attention to two aspects of agrarian life in India. First, we want to emphasize that circular migration has been a longstanding survival strategy for dalits and tribals in dryland India—at least since the colonial period, if not earlier. As such, experiences of mobility have been integral to the subjectivities and cultural/political aspirations of these groups. Dalits and tribals from Bengal, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu have traversed a bewildering array of migratory circuits. They have traveled as agricultural workers to the fertile agricultural plains of the Indian river valleys, as plantation workers to tea, coffee, and rubber estates in the Nilgiri hills of southwestern Indian, the Himalayan foothills in the north, and the hilly tracts of northeast Bengal and Assam, as mine workers to mines and allied industries in eastern and southern India, as indentured construction and plantation workers to Uganda, Malaysia, Natal, and the Caribbean, and have served as a "reserve army of labor" for the heavy industries around steel cities and petrochemical complexes in postcolonial India.

Like the circuits themselves, the duration of circular migration has been varied. In some cases, the cycle is a daily one between places of work and home; in other cases, it is seasonal; in yet other cases, migrants return home sporadically, after long intervals; and some migrants even leave permanently—or so they think—and then return home to retire. What is interesting and common to these biographies of circular migration is the imprint of mobility—what we might call "migrant memory"—on subsequent practices of labor deployment. For instance, in all three multicaste villages included in Sivaramakrishnan's current research site in the northern Tamil Nadu district of Tiruvannamalai, there are several families from which members left as indentured workers for Natal or Malaysia. Some sent their children back to newly independent India to farm, but their children have migrated in turn to work in the jute mills of Calcutta or the Bhilai steel plant in Chhatisgarh, in central India. Regardless of the particular trajectories and outcomes of travel, however, upper-caste, dalit, and tribal migrants from Tiruvannamalai have been willing to travel great distances in order to accumulate and remit surpluses—all part of their unequal struggles for recognition in a place they continue to call their *sontha uuru* (native place). One future research direction for our project is to document family biographies of migration, differentiated by caste, religion, ethnicity, and gender and explore how varied experiences of "migrant cosmopolitanism" (the cultural, political, and economic resources enabled by mobility) have influenced anticolonial, national, and now subnational politics.

This brings us to the second aspect of agrarian life at this historical conjuncture. We want to suggest that political upheavals in India over the past fifteen years as a result of the "second democratic upsurge"(Yadav 2000)—a reference to the rise of dalit, tribal, and other minority participation in electoral and other political processes in a more open, assertive way[41]—may be responsible for enabling previously unimaginable counterhegemonic practices by dalits and tribals. Indeed, even as we present evidence of "body politics" in this article, we are groping to answer a much larger question: whether dalit and tribal migrants are, wittingly or unwittingly, operating as agents for the diffusion of political sensibilities across the rural landscape and providing the impetus to regional political movements—several of which explicitly claim dalit and tribal subalterns as their primary constituencies and challenge not merely regional hierarchies but also the hegemony of the "caste-ist"/"Hindu" nation. The significance of this line of thought derives support from microstudies of migration that testify to an increase in the forms and extent of migration—in part as a result of uneven development and globalization that have produced regional labor markets, regional political forms, and regional spaces for cultural assertion of the sort we have illuminated in this article.

More pertinently, the sort of questions thrown up by our research provoke us to examine closely the efforts of the new migration scholars to liberate population geography not only from its behavioral and structural straitjackets but also—and more importantly—from its links to Eurocentric ideologies of "modernization" and "development." Predictably, these scholars invoke postcolonial and postdevelopment critiques of modernity in support of their project. But while these critiques are powerful, we try to show that they remain problematic, partly because they fail to theorize the spatial and cultural particularities of "modernity" (a task that involves vernacularizing and pluralizing the notion of "modernity"), and partly because they rely on a Foucauldian analytic of power that seems to preclude any effective space for political action of the sort we describe in this essay.

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To recognize the ways in which counterhegemonic practices are enabled by circular migration and thus contribute to the work begun by the new migration scholars, we introduce two organizing concepts—an oppositional notion of self-making we term "body politics" that underscores the liberatory potential of migration within the context of "development," and a provincialized notion of "modernity" we term "regional modernities" that avoids the conceptual contradictions of existing postcolonial and postdevelopment appraisals of migration. Our findings on the varied encounters of migrants with regional modernities and their rising cultural assertiveness resonate with those of recent migration scholars who have conducted research in eastern and western India, as well as in Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, and Ecuador.

In their survey of geographies of consumption, Jackson and Thrift (1995, 205) note that, in their engagement with consumption, eminent Marxist geographers such as David Harvey treat it "as part of the 'politics of distraction' rather than as a substantive topic on its own account." They go on to note that in Harvey's work, "[t]he culture of consumption is reduced to the economic imperative of sustaining sufficiently buoyant levels of demand to keep capitalist production profitable. Consumption is about 'the cultivation of imaginary appetites'; it is part of the "surface froth and evanescence, the fragmentation and disruptions, so characteristic of present political economy." We do not dismiss Harvey's critique of consumption as misplaced, for we recognize that modern economies of desire can dissipate political projects and disempower people. But we want to keep open the possibility that the cosmopolitan world of goods and significations can have emancipatory potential for groups subordinated by "traditional," place-specific relations of hierarchy.

While we depart from Harvey on this point, it is hardly into the waiting arms of subculture theorists, such as Miller (1995a, 1995b), who anoint consumerism as a new, diffuse form of resistance. These celebrationist narratives offer a mythologized consumer as agent of history. By contrast, in our framework, the migrant as consumer is a creature of more modest aspirations, prescience, and agency. Like Gramsci's peasant, he or she exhibits a streak of conservatism and realizes his or her agency in unlikely rather than clearly articulated ways. More often than not, migrants continue to retain primary attachments to their home villages, and successful migrants utilize their newly acquired wealth to upgrade social and political status at home. In this sense, they are circumspect "rebels" who seek to ascend or modify a given hierarchy rather than to dismantle it.

One of our major claims in this essay is that once the cultural logic of migration is taken into account, the frequently invoked link between declining livelihood security and increasing proclivity to migrate becomes harder to sustain. In the evolving world of rural cosmopolitanism, livelihood security may no longer be the overarching factor in determining migration. In fact, we would go so far as to suggest that migration may be undertaken, even if it sometimes compromises the livelihood security and working conditions of the migrant—provided it contains the promise to positively transform place-based identities and relations of subjugation.

Finally, we suggest that our understanding of agrarian change can be substantially enriched by returning to an older but ailing tradition of Marxism, one that sees labor as a simultaneously material and symbolic activity. Precisely because some form of work is a prerequisite for social reproduction, the terms and conditions under which individuals deploy their labor become core to identity formation, particularly their internalized notions of hierarchy with reference to caste, class, gender, community, and place. In dialectical fashion, these notions then inform subsequent labor deployment in time and space, including patterns of migration. We have already explained why these acts of migration can be a potent force of social change. In short, we think there is tremendous scope for energizing and expanding intellectual and political debate on the "agrarian question" within human geography by renewed commitment to phenomenologies of rural work.

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Notes

1. The observations developed in this essay apply to seasonal or circular migrants and relay migrants, not to permanent out-migrants. Labor circulation encompasses transhumance, rural to urban, and intrarural migration, whether of a short term or semipermanent nature. For taxonomies of migration, see Chapman and Prothero (1985) and Rogaly (1996).
2. Our stance on "modernity" deserves clarification: we reject both the "transition" narrative that portrays the history of societies as a discontinuous switch from the "traditional" to the "modern" (hence, implicitly suggests a defining moment when "modernity" takes hold of rural society) and the related "modernization" narrative that portrays history in progressivist, evolutionary terms. Instead, we take the position of South Asian and Latin American scholars of subalternity (Chatterjee 1993; Coronil 1997; Dussel 1998; Mignolo 1999; Prakash 1999; Chakrabarty 2000) that "modernity" is a pluritopic phenomenon, not confined to Europe, and that the rationalizing effects we observe in societies and ascribe to a singular, European modernity are in fact the operation of an Eurocentric discourse that has collapsed geographically differentiated processes of modernity (representing the articulation of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial polities) into a unitary, historicist account. Watts (1995) makes a similar point.
3. Harvey (1989), Anderson (1998), and Twitchell (1999) offer trenchant analyses of these pathologies, particularly commodity fetishism.
4. Although we bracket the issue of gender in this article, obviously our intention is neither to suggest that the migrating body is only male nor to say that the renegotiation of gender identities is politically less salient than the tussles over class, ethnic, caste, and tribal identities. Rather, our emphasis in this article on caste and tribal identifications reflects our research trajectory, as well as a perceived gap in the migration literature on these struggles.
5. We understand "labor valorization," in Marx's ([1876] 1976, ch. 7) sense, as the process whereby the commodity, labor power, is purchased and consumed for its use-value within a capitalist production process in order to generate surplus value. However, in this article we understand acts of consumption and labor valorization not as merely about the acquisition of use- or the transfer of exchange-values, but just as crucially, for their symbolic value in communicating social distinction. The communicative aspect of commodities is the subject of a rich literature. We owe debts primarily to Veblen ([1899] 1994), Douglas and Isherwood ([1979] 1996), Bourdieu (1984), Appadurai (1986), Baudrillard (1988), McCracken (1988), Parry and Bloch (1989), and Miller (1995a, 1995b). Like several of these authors, we want to underscore the signaling and gate-keeping functions of commodities—the ways in which they serve to mark social boundaries and hierarchies.
6. Bourdieu (1977) contrasts "heterodoxy" (the universe of competing possibilities) to "doxa" (the universe of undisputed ideas) and "orthodoxy" (the universe of straightened or rationalized ideas). We employ the word "heterodoxy" in this precise sense to convey the point that "body politics" is intrinsically about the dominated challenging the institutionalized or internalized censorships of the dominant.
7. Arnold (1984) discusses how Gramsci's ideas can augment our understanding of peasant subalternity in India.
8. Aside from the work of Stuart Hall (see, for instance, Hall and Jefferson 1976) and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) also deserves mention here. Witness this account (1984, xii–xiii):

   > To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production [i.e., a dominating media] corresponds *another* production, called "consumption." The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silent and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order.
   >
   > We appreciate the spirit of subversiveness that pervades de Certeau's account, but we find it overly instrumental and optimistic. Our view is much closer to Gramsci's, who recognizes the contradictions and brittleness of both hegemony and agency.

9. Significantly, Frederick Cooper's work claims that the origins of "development" were not exclusively European—that, in fact, it is tied to how the "labor question" was resolved in Europe's African colonies (*vide* Cooper 1992).
10. The key variable in the migrant's decision to move is net *expected* earnings. In other words, the rational migrant weighs the industry to agriculture wage differential by the probability of finding urban employment and subtracts migration costs from this expected income.
11. In the popular Harris-Todaro (1970) model of migration, the equilibrium condition reads: $(L_F/L_F + L_I)w_F + (L_I/L_F + L_I)w_I = w_A$, where L_F is total formal employment available in the urban sector, L_I is total informal employment available in the urban sector, w_F is the fixed or mandated wage rate in the formal sector, w_I is the wage rate in the informal sector, and w_A is the wage rate in agriculture. The term $(L_F/L_F + L_I)$ is simply the probability that the migrant will find formal employment in the urban sector; similarly, the term $(L_I/L_F + L_I)$ represents the probability that the migrant will find informal employment in the urban sector. Thus, the left-hand side of the equation gives the migrant's expected earning in the urban sector. In equilibrium—that is, a state where no person wishes to migrate from one sector to the other—expected urban sector wage must equal the prevailing agricultural wage.
12. The decennial census of India provides figures on the stock of rural migrants (urban residents of rural origin) in the survey year and can therefore be used to track decennial changes in migrant inflows to urban areas. Unfortunately, the census

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data allow no way of discerning permanent migrants from circular migrants. As mentioned in the text, most estimates of circular migration rely on intelligent conjectures from smaller regional surveys and ethnographic studies. Papola (1997) and Srivastava (1998) discuss limitations of the Indian census data for migration studies.

13. The word "dalit" applies to those downtrodden groups who, within the scheme of orthodox Hinduism, were considered ritually impure and therefore untouchable. Unlike the euphemism "harijan" (people of god) coined by Mahatma Gandhi, the term "dalit" has an explicitly political, anticaste connotation. Zelliot (1992), Omvedt (1995), Fernandes 1996, Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998), Deliége (1999), Michael (1999), and Moon (2001) ably document the rise of dalit social consciousness and dalit movements in India. A note of clarification: we employ the term "dalit" for members of historically subordinated low-caste groups because this is increasingly how they choose to represent themselves (and when they do not, we substitute the proper term of reference—for instance, "harijan"). By contrast, the term "adivasi" (original inhabitant) does not carry the same positive or political connotations as the term "dalit." Tribal groups do not use it self-referentially (instead, they use their proper group name—for example, "bhil"). And upper-caste groups often employ the term "adivasi" derogatorily. Hence, we prefer to use the term "tribal" in place of "adivasi."
14. For our purpose, "space," in any historical context, can be circumscribed by material social processes that involve the traffic of goods or ideas between sets of people; by contrast, "place" refers to the forms of consciousness with which individuals and groups apprehend and transform particular material spaces, taking for granted that these forms of consciousness are dialectically related to social power relations. This distinction builds on Heidegger (1977, 332ff.) and the evocative discussion of place that is developed in Basso (1996, 105–49). Creed and Ching (1997, 7) offer a related definition of place as "a *grounded* metaphor."
15. We thank two of the anonymous referees for urging us to foreground the feminist literature on "body politics."
16. Parry (1999) goes on to provide a vivid account of a tension between young and old that crosses caste lines and is the result of a generalized disenchantment with agrarian life. He (117) notes that "[T]he fact is that agricultural work is now regarded with deep distaste—especially by the young . . . even unemployed youngsters resolutely refuse to so much as supervise the work of day laborers in the fields, let alone work in them themselves . . . the young see agriculture as emblematic of the rustic world."
17. Whereas the Patels ultimately chose to emulate Vanias, the Kolis adopted the Kshatriya model—particularly after their political mobilization in the 1950s and 1960s by the Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha (on the role of caste associations in the prosecution of Rajput Kshatriya identity, see Kothari and Maru 1970; Shah 1975; Lobo 1995). Like Patels before them, the Kolis retained the services of Barots to build Rajput genealogies for them (Shah and Shroff 1959).
18. Again, it is difficult to sift fact from fiction in this contest over identities. If anything, the struggle over rank exposes that an essentialist account of caste, one that sees it as fixed in time and space, is irretrievably flawed.
19. Breman (1985, 1996) does an especially fine job of this in the Gujarat context. Karlekar (1995), Menon (1995), Saradamoni (1995), and Teerink (1995) document the difficult work environment of women migrants in various other parts of India, based on detailed ethnographic fieldwork. Pryer (1992) discusses the Bangladesh case.
20. At the time of our field research in 1993–1994, the Lodhas were paid five kilos of rice (*dhan*) and two rupees for tiffin at the end of the workday. They could make the cash equivalent of that wage and sometimes slightly more performing coolie work in the nearby market town of Jhargram, if such work was in fact available. When they took a head-load of fuel-wood into the bazaar, it usually fetched fifty to sixty rupees (three times the daily earning from farm or coolie work). But the preparation of such a head-load usually involved *two* days of work by a Lodha man and *half a day* of walking to the location of sale by a Lodha woman.
21. The Kangsabati canal project failed in part due to the enactment of the Forest Conservation Act in 1980 by the government of India and the subsequent refusal of the Forest Department to allow conversion of forest land into a watercourse. For details, see Sivaramakrishnan (1998).
22. We are grateful to the authors for granting us permission to cite from their preliminary record of findings.
23. The name "Vankar" is a synthesis of the Gujarati noun *van* (meaning "unginned cotton") and the verb *kar* ("to do"); hence, a Vankar is someone who transforms cotton—a weaver.
24. The figures on educational attainment are drawn from Gidwani (1996, 8, table 1.1). Remaining information is distilled from Gidwani's field notes on changing agrarian relations in the village of Shamli in the Matar subdistrict of the Kheda District, Gujarat, recorded between 8 May 1994 and 31 August 1995. Village and respondent names here and below have been altered to preserve confidentiality.
25. Hence, Gooptu (1993, 277–98) describes how the Adi Hindu movement in Uttar Pradesh in the early twentieth century, which gained momentum with urbanization and migration, transformed the labor practices of the untouchable Chamar caste—although she is careful to qualify that the rejection of degrading menial work by Chamars did not translate into a pointed rejection of the caste system itself. In short, subaltern agency can express itself in ways that are *simultaneously* unconventional *and* conservative.
26. Field notes, Gidwani (1996). Names of villagers and villages have been altered to preserve confidentiality. Gidwani used the term "harijan" rather than "dalit" because this is how his respondents referred to themselves.
27. It is important to clarify that we view aesthetics as an aspect of politics. In so doing, we abjure a common view (sometimes linked to the works of Adorno and Horkheimer) that interprets aesthetics as a form of escape from (the despair of) politics. We want to assert the materiality of aesthetics and hence its expression not just in consumption styles but also in the recasting of the working body. Having clarified this, we clearly believe that body politics exceeds aesthetics, because the domination of bodies cannot—and should not—be reduced to aesthetics alone. That would diminish the physical and psychological violence of domination.
28. Ferguson (1999, 95) writes: "I use the term cultural style to refer to practices that signify differences between social categories. Cultural styles in this usage do not pick out total modes of behavior but rather poles of social signification, cross-cutting and cross-cut by other such poles." He uses the term "style" to emphasize the accomplished performative

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nature of such practices. Ferguson cautions that we should not assume shared cultural commonalities can survive persistent stylistic differences that may arise in situational behavior. Equally, we must be careful not to presume that similar styles signify similar things for different people (Ferguson 1999, 93–97).

29. This body politics of consumption echoes the notion of "cultural production" advanced by Lisa Lowe (1996). As she (158) observes, "[C]ultural forms of many kinds are important media in the formation of oppositional narratives and are crucial to the imagination and rearticulation of new forms of political subjectivity, collectivity, and practice."
30. The struggle over attire and lower-caste consciousness of the uses of attire in making defiant gestures is not a new phenomenon in Tamil Nadu. Andre Beteille's classic study ([1966] 1996) of a Thanjavur village contains evidence of similar assertion by young men returned from breathing the fresh air of self-respect in cities where they studied or worked, even as casual labor. The interesting twist in the story is the way the struggle over attire in the 1960s was about violating proscriptions about covering parts of the body or affecting upper-caste styles of traditional dress. Thirty years later the contest is conducted in cultural styles evoking modern fashions and cosmopolitan attire.
31. Dressing in styles considered as "hip" or "chic" in the metropolitan centers visited by migrants in their work-related travels often proves to be the most easily available form of self-assertion when they return to social relations of dependency and subordination in their home villages. Osella and Osella (1999) provide comparative endorsement of this point in their study of the low-caste Izhavas of Kerala. Their study also notes how low-caste groups adopt differentiated, rather than uniform, consumption strategies in their efforts to assert new identities.
32. According to Geoghehan (1873, 71) more than 20 percent of overseas migrants returned home, braving the most appalling traveling conditions, between 1842 and 1870. So this aspiration clearly cut across historical periods and the spatial seams of the migration experience.
33. Comins (1892) provides detailed information on wealth created and returned by emigrants to India. The scale of repatriation led to a fear in colonial governments of a drain of wealth and skills from the island colonies.
34. This description and the preceding paragraph draw on Sivaramakrishnan's field notes for June 1999. A study is presently being conducted in four villages, including one tribal village, and three multicaste villages with significant dalit populations in Tiruvannamalai District, Tamil Nadu, India. One of these villages has been specifically selected for its periurban location less than ten miles from the district town. In addition to open-ended interviews and periods of participant observation, a baseline survey of socioeconomic characteristics was conducted in all four villages during 1999 and 2000, covering 1,534 families in the multicaste villages and 56 families in the tribal village. Information on migration stories was collected in the course of these surveys.
35. Our skepticism on the possibility of exercising "freedom" within the framework of biopower is offset by an altogether different skepticism on the part of theorists such Wendy Brown (1995, 63–64) who fear that Foucault, in fact, yields to a naive "volunteerism" that arises from his tacit assumption about the "givenness and resilience of the desire for freedom." She (64) attributes Foucault's optimism about "freedom" to his "rejection of psychoanalysis and his arrested reading of Nietzsche (his utter neglect of Nietzsche's diagnosis of the culture of modernity as the triumph of 'slave morality')." We find Brown's psychoanalytic critique curiously totalizing, unlike Gramsci's understanding of subaltern "consciousness" as a fragmentary, bizarre combination of conceptions and goals sutured together.
36. Foucault (1977, 1979, 1980) asserted that he was offering an analytics of power rather than a theory of power. This is entirely consistent with his picture of power as a capillary force that suffuses bodies and the body society. Since power is everywhere (there is no "outside") it is, then, logically impossible to give an account of power that is objective or a priori, as theories claim to be. By the same token, it is difficult to imagine a subjectivity that does not serve power—and if this is so, in what sense is it meaningful to speak of human agency? Silvey and Lawson (1999) contend that migrant narratives contained in life histories, folk songs, poems and other nonconventional sources of information offer us a way of recovering uncolonized subjectivities. But this fails to address the problem that Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983, 203) concede in their largely sympathetic appraisal of Foucault's work: "The force of biopower lies in defining reality as well as producing it. This reality takes the world to be composed of subjects and objects and their totalizing normalization. Any solution that takes these terms for granted—even if it is to oppose them—will contribute to the hold of power." Some of the methodological problems in recovering subaltern voices are discussed in Guha (1983), Spivak (1988), Bhabha (1994), and Pratt (1999). Foucault evidently began to move away from his pervasive emphasis on power and tackle the analytics of agency in his later writings (the three-volume *History of Sexuality* [beginning in 1979] is thought to represent the beginning of these endeavors). Regrettably, his task remained unfinished.
37. Butler's effort to combine theoretical insights from Jacques Derrida, Foucault, and Luce Irigaray to discuss the possibilities of politically transgressive agency is noteworthy in this regard. She introduces a temporal factor in Foucault's notion of discourse through the idea of "citationality." This simply means that the terms of discourse must be reiteratively and performatively reproduced by those who are enacted as subjects by that discourse. This injects the possibility of slippage during reiterations and hence, for Butler, the possibility that the realm of the "abject"—the constitutive and excluded outside—which is ordinarily "uninhabitable" and "unlivable," becomes imagined as an alternative to some normalizing "regulative ideal" (such as heterosexuality). But despite her rejection of voluntarism, even Butler seems to succumb to the need to smuggle in a moment of "free will" in order to argue the possibility of resistance. See Butler (1993, introduction; 1997, ch. 3). The work of Robert Sack (1997) offers provocative insights on the necessity of "free will."
38. As Chakrabarty (2000, introduction and ch. 1, 8) explains, historicism spawned a "not yet" or "waiting room version" of history on the part of colonial rulers—and even liberal intellectuals such as John Stuart Mill—who maintained that some "historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they [Indians or Africans] could be considered prepared for [the task of self-rule or government]."

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39. See Simon (1997), Moore (2000), Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal (forthcoming), and Gidwani (forthcoming) for detailed critiques of postdevelopment.
40. Circular migration has a long history in the Indian subcontinent. Rarely, however, did it permit subaltern classes to repudiate traditional hierarchies and codes of conduct. But today, the spread of television, city editions of newspapers, retailing, transportation, and state-sponsored literacy programs has hugely expanded and accelerated the flow of materials and meanings and granted new potency to consumption as a source of counteridentity. Similarly, the political space in which subordinated groups like dalits and tribals can operate has also widened with the entrenchment of state affirmative-action programs and the rise of panregional dalit movements that recognize the influence dalits can exert in a democratic nation-state via their immense collective voting power. These sorts of structural changes in postcolonial India make subaltern "body politics" possible and effective.
41. For a discussion of the second democratic upsurge, see Yadav (2000). As he points out, this needs to be juxtaposed with the "first upsurge" in the 1960s, which witnessed the widening and deepening of political participation in the country through the channels of strong middle-of-the-road parties.

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